

Section E

Man fatally shot by Riverside police

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

01/01/2003

RIVERSIDE – A man was shot and killed by police inside a southwest Riverside home Tuesday night, authorities said. Riverside police released no details of the shooting.

Police came to a home in the 2700 block of Aires Lane, near Tyler and Victoria avenues, after a woman called 911 about 7:20 p.m. and said she had been choked, Riverside County fire Battalion Chief Tedd Laycock said.

Paramedics withdrew from the house when they were told a man was armed with a knife and planned to commit “suicide by cop,” Laycock said.

The man was shot about 8:05 p.m., Laycock said. He was taken to Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Riverside.

No one else was injured, Laycock said.

Neighbor says man wanted to be killed by the police

SHOOTING: The Riverside resident, 22, was slain by police Tuesday while holding a knife.

01/02/2003

By VANESSA COLON and RICH SASKAL
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

RIVERSIDE - A 22-year-old Riverside man who was shot to death New Year's Eve by Riverside police had told his mother weeks before that he wanted to be killed by police, a neighbor said Wednesday.

Michael Wetter was holding a 4-year-old child and wielding a knife when he charged police, causing police to shoot, said Riverside police Lt. Mark McFall.

Wetter was shot about 8:05 p.m. Tuesday inside a single-story home in the 2700 block of Aries Lane, near Tyler and Victoria avenues, police said.

He was pronounced dead after paramedics arrived to treat him.

McFall said Riverside police would not release any additional information before today, including details on how many shots were fired, how many officers fired them and where Wetter was hit.

Police said they went to the home Tuesday night after a woman in the house called about being assaulted by Wetter.

When officers arrived, the woman had escaped the house, but she told police Wetter was still inside with her niece and her niece's two children, ages 3 and 4, authorities said.

Police were trying to rescue the children when Wetter confronted them, holding the 4-year-old and wielding a knife. He was shot when he charged police, authorities said.

Bess Wening, a neighbor who lives directly across the street, said Wetter had told his mother weeks before the shooting that he wanted to be killed by police. Wening said the mother told her.

Riverside County fire Battalion Chief Tedd Laycock said the night of the shooting that Wetter had planned to commit "suicide by cop." Wetter, his mother, the niece and her two children moved into the gray-and-white single-story home about a month ago after living in Anaheim, Wening said.

"It's been a quiet house," Wening said. "I've never expected this to happen," she said.

McFall said the standard procedure in officer-involved shootings is to place officers on paid administrative leave and conduct a thorough investigation.

"They are typically given some administrative time off with pay because it is such an emotional experience, an intense event," he said. "They're not ready to function yet."

Reach Vanessa ColÀon at (909) 682-6181 or vcolon@pe.com

Man upset over drink

RIVERSIDE: He hurt his mother for denying him liquor before he was shot by police, officials say.

01/03/2003

By LISA O'NEILL HILL
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

RIVERSIDE - A 22-year-old man shot and killed by Riverside police on New Year's Eve held a knife to the throat of a 4-year-old child, then charged an officer with the weapon raised, authorities said Thursday.

Michael Wetter, who authorities said previously had talked about committing "suicide by cop," was pronounced dead at 8:20 p.m. Tuesday inside a home on Aries Lane where he had lived with his mother, his mother's niece and the niece's two young children.

William Rodriguez, the officer who shot Wetter, remained on paid administrative leave Thursday, a standard procedure when an officer fires his or her weapon on duty.

Rodriguez fired his gun to protect the officer who was being charged, said Riverside police Lt. John Wallace. Rodriguez has been with the Police Department since April and is a former New York Police Department detective, Wallace said.

Wallace declined to say how many times Wetter was shot or where on his body he was struck. He said police also were waiting for toxicology results from the Riverside County Sheriff-Coroner's Office.

Neighbor Bess Wening called police about 7:15 p.m. after Wetter's mother, Laurie Wetter, knocked on Wening's door. Laurie Wetter, who had marks around her neck and a bloodied nose and mouth, said her son had assaulted and choked her, Wening said.

Laurie Wetter also said she and her son had argued about alcohol.

The mother told police she had given her son a couple of 40- ounce beers, Riverside County Deputy District Attorney Kelton Tobler said.

"The information we have from her is that she provided some alcohol to her son earlier on New Year's Eve but was keeping the hard liquor away from him and he became upset about that and that led to him assaulting and choking her," said Tobler, who went to the shooting scene Tuesday.

Laurie Wetter escaped from the home but told police that her niece's children, ages 2 and 4, were still inside with her son, Riverside police said; the children's mother was at work. Officers were trying to get the children out of the house through a large rear window when Wetter confronted them, police said. He was armed with a large knife and was holding it to the throat of the 4-year-old. Police said officers repeatedly ordered Wetter to drop the weapon, but he refused.

Police said Wetter was shot when he held the weapon up and charged an officer.

"He came at the officer in a very threatening manner and one of our officers made the decision to fire his service weapon," Wallace said.

Wening said Wetter had told his mother weeks before the shooting that he wanted to be killed by police.

"I honestly don't think they had a choice," Wening said of the officers. "This was something that obviously he had talked about. He thought it out."

Tobler said Laurie Wetter told police that her son became violent when he drank. She also told authorities that her son said something along the lines of "don't involve the cops or I'll make them shoot me," Tobler said.

Laurie Wetter, her niece, and the niece's children are staying with other relatives. They returned briefly on Wednesday to get clothes and personal belongings, Wening said.

Wening and her husband, Rick, called the incident tragic and sad.

The shooting will be discussed at an upcoming Community Police Review Commission meeting.

Don Williams, executive director of the commission, said he has notified the commission's independent investigator about the killing. The investigator has started gathering background material, Williams said. The commission will discuss the shooting, possibly at its next meeting, scheduled for Jan. 8, Williams said.

Reach Lisa O'Neill Hill at (909) 368-9462 or loneillhill@pe.com

Mom criticizes police in son's death

RIVERSIDE: Laurie Wetter says officers should not have used lethal force.

01/08/2003

By LISA O'NEILL HILL
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

RIVERSIDE - The mother of a knife-wielding man fatally shot by Riverside police on New Year's Eve said Tuesday that police could have handled the situation differently.

Laurie Wetter said she told officers that her 22-year-old son, Michael, did not want to return to jail and that he would make them shoot him if they tried to arrest him. She also said she told police her son would have a knife.

But she questioned why police did not call out hostage negotiators, use a SWAT team or try less-lethal ammunition before the shooting.

"I just don't want this to happen to anyone else," Laurie Wetter, 46, said. "I really don't think he was ready to die."

Riverside police have said Wetter held a knife to the throat of a 4-year-old child, then charged an officer with the weapon raised. Officer William Rodriguez, a former New York City police detective, fired his gun to protect the officer who was being charged, Riverside police Lt. John Wallace has said.

Meeting scheduled

Rodriguez has returned to duty, Wallace said Tuesday. Wallace declined additional comment, saying police would brief the Community Police Review Commission meeting about the shooting today. That meeting is scheduled for 5:30 p.m. at the Riverside City Council Chambers.

Authorities have said that Wetter had said in the past that he wanted to be killed by police.

"Even though he might have said the suicide-by-cop stuff, it doesn't give them the right to kill him," Laurie Wetter said.

Riverside's policy allows for the use of deadly force if an officer has reasonable cause to believe that a suspect poses a significant threat of death or serious injury to the officer or another person.

A neighbor called police to the home on Aries Lane about 7:15 p.m. after Laurie Wetter showed up at her door with a bloodied lip and nose and marks around her neck. Laurie Wetter told the neighbor her son had assaulted and choked her, the neighbor has said.

Did not understand

Laurie Wetter said Tuesday that her son had never been violent toward her before and that she did not understand why it happened. Her son, she said, had had two 40-ounce beers, but was not intoxicated. Authorities have said that Wetter had wanted more liquor and had become upset when his mother would not provide it. Laurie Wetter escaped from the home but told police that her niece's children, ages 2 and 4, were still inside with her son, Riverside police said.

Officers were trying to get the children out of the house through a large rear window when Wetter confronted them, police said. He was armed with a large knife and was holding it to the throat of the 4-year-old, an action that Laurie Wetter said she does not believe because she said her son would not have hurt the children.

"I know he would never touch a hair on their heads. He only had one of the kids in his arms so they wouldn't shoot him," she said.

Officer fires

Police have said officers repeatedly ordered Wetter to drop the weapon, but he refused.

Rodriguez fired when Wetter held up the weapon and charged an officer in a threatening manner, police said.

Wetter was shot in the head by an officer standing behind him, his mother said. Police have declined to release specific information about where on his body Wetter was shot. Wetter had spent eight months in jail after he went after a friend of his father's with a knife when he was 18, his mother said. He also had a warrant in San Diego, she said.

Laurie Wetter said she and her son had always been close. She said they only had been in Riverside for about a month and that her son used to work for a Goodwill store in San Diego.

The night before the shooting, Wetter had been running around the house, laughing and giggling with one of the children, his mother said. Laurie Wetter said her son adored the children and someday wanted his own.

"I miss my son desperately," Laurie Wetter said. "I don't believe it was truly his time to go yet."

Reach Lisa O'Neill Hill at (909) 368-9462 or loneillhill@pe.com

Probe set of shooting by police

RIVERSIDE: The civilian board promises updates on its look into the death of a knife-wielding man.

01/09/2003

By LISA O'NEILL HILL
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

RIVERSIDE - Members of the city's civilian review board pledged Wednesday to conduct an independent investigation into the police shooting death of a knife-wielding man and to provide updates on the status of their inquiry.

On Wednesday night, Riverside police briefed the Community Police Review Commission about the New Year's Eve death of Michael Wetter, 22, who police say held two knives and a 4-year-old girl when he was shot by a police officer.

Wetter's mother, Laurie Wetter, cried and bit her nails as police Capt. Dave Dominguez explained the chain of events that led to the shooting.

Laurie Wetter has said she warned police that her son would make officers shoot him if they tried to arrest him and that he was armed with a knife.

A neighbor had called police to the home on Aries Lane in southwest Riverside about 7:15 p.m. after Laurie Wetter said her son had assaulted and choked her. Laurie Wetter had escaped from the home but her niece's children, ages 3 and 4, were still inside with her son.

Laurie Wetter had told authorities that her son had made previous statements about committing "suicide by cop."

Talking about "suicide by cop does not give anyone permission to kill you," Laurie Wetter told the commission Wednesday night.

Two officers entered the home through a bedroom window to try to get the children out, Dominguez said.

One officer, Scott Borngrebe, was armed with a 12-gauge shotgun loaded with less-lethal ammunition. The other, William Rodriguez, carried his service handgun. Borngrebe saw the 4-year-old girl in the hallway and tried to make the child walk toward him, the captain said.

Michael Wetter then "appeared from a position of concealment" and picked up the child with his left arm, Dominguez said. Wetter was holding two knives, including one with a 7-inch blade, and held one to the child's throat, Dominguez said.

Borngrebe shouted, "He has a knife. He has a knife," the captain said.

Dominguez said Borngrebe pointed his less-lethal shotgun at Wetter and told him to drop the weapons. The officer began backing up. Wetter was advancing on Borngrebe, who backed into a corner, Dominguez said. Rodriguez fired once. Wetter was struck in the back of the head.

Michael Wetter's record included a warrant for alleged assault with a deadly weapon out of San Diego, and he was on felony probation for domestic violence and evading arrest in Tennessee, Dominguez said.

Resident Mary Shelton said police always provide criminal records of people shot by police, but said residents are told nothing about the history of the officers involved.

"That kind of gives you an asymmetric perspective if you're a member of the community," she said.

Reach Lisa O'Neill Hill at (909) 368-9462 or loneillhill@pe.com

Police panel probes death

RIVERSIDE: The victim pointed a gun at officers before he was shot, the commission is told.

02/06/2003

By MELANIE C. JOHNSON and LISA O'NEILL HILL
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

RIVERSIDE - Being wanted on two felony arrest warrants may have prompted a man to flee police and point a gun at them during a recent fatal shooting, a police official said.

During a special meeting Wednesday night of the Community Police Review Commission, Capt. Dave Dominguez briefed the panel on the shooting death of Robert McComb.

McComb, 36, whose last known address was in Corona, was fatally shot Jan. 28. Dominguez said McComb was being chased by two Riverside police officers, Jose Loera and Ryan Wilson, when he turned and pointed a .25-caliber gun at them.

The shooting occurred just after midnight on Indiana Avenue in the Riverside Auto Center. The area was well-lit by a nearby car dealership, Dominguez said.

"Wilson saw the gun . . . and fired two rounds," Dominguez said as he turned his body and extended his arm during a demonstration of McComb's confrontation with the two officers. "Loera fired three rounds and the suspect was hit twice."

McComb was on felony probation and had two warrants out for his arrest at the time of the shooting, Dominguez said. McComb had felony convictions on burglary, firearm possession and drug charges, he said.

The two officers tried to stop McComb for expired car-registration tags near Indiana Avenue and Bernard Street, Dominguez said. When they got out of their car and approached McComb's red Nissan sedan, McComb drove off, he said.

The car stopped a short distance away and McComb ran off, Dominguez said. McComb then ran into a residential area and into a back yard, where he tried to open a back door but could not get in.

McComb ran back toward Indiana Avenue and turned toward the pursuing officers, holding a handgun and pointing it in their direction, Dominguez said. Both officers fired.

McComb is the third person to be shot and killed by Riverside police in less than three months.

On New Year's Eve, an officer shot and killed Michael Wetter, 22, who police said held two knives and a 4-year-old girl when he was shot.

On Nov. 17, 40-year-old Anastacio Munoz was shot and killed by police after a brief pursuit that police said began when an officer spotted him weaving and driving erratically in the area of Tyler Street and California Avenue.

Police said Munoz disobeyed police commands, drove across two lawns and tried to run over an officer with his vehicle.

No one was fatally shot by Riverside police in 1999 or 2000. In 2001, Riverside police shot and killed one person, Vanpaseuth Phaisouphanh, 25. Police said he was shot after approaching an officer while holding knives in both hands and refusing police orders to drop the weapons.

Resident Mary Shelton said she was concerned about the recent officer-involved shootings and the danger to residents.

"What about the situation where officers are firing in the street and there are residences?" Shelton said. "I was disturbed when I heard about the shots."

Reach Melanie C. Johnson at (909) 368-9450 or mjohnson@pe.com and Lisa O'Neill Hill at (909) 368-9462 or loneillhill@pe.com

Man shot by police after pursuit, dies

SHOOTING: He had pulled a gun on officers near the Riverside Auto Center. No one else was hurt.

01/29/2003

**By JOSE ARBALLO JR.
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE**

RIVERSIDE - A man being chased by Riverside police was shot and killed Tuesday after he turned on pursuing officers and pointed a gun at them, authorities said.

Robert McComb, 36, of Costa Mesa, died just after 12:30 a.m. at Riverside Community Hospital. McComb had been shot multiple times in the upper and lower torso, said Rick Bogan, deputy coroner for Riverside County.

McComb lists various addresses, including some in Riverside, Norco, Corona and Orange County, Bogan said.



Kurt Miller/The Press-Enterprise

Riverside police work the scene near the intersection of Indiana Avenue and Vance Street, where officials said two officers shot and killed a man after he pulled a gun on them after a car chase.

The officers involved in the shooting, Jose Loera and Ryan Wilson, were not injured and have been placed on administrative leave as is customary in such cases, said Officer Felix Medina, spokesman for the Riverside Police Department. Loera is an eight-year veteran of the department and the training officer for Wilson, who has been with the agency for three months, Medina said.

The shooting occurred just after midnight on Indiana Avenue, between Vance and Doyle streets, in the Riverside Auto Center.

The officers stopped McComb, who was alone driving a compact sedan, near Indiana Avenue and Bernard Street for an undisclosed vehicle violation, Medina said. The officers got out of their cruiser and approached the car, which drove off and headed east on Indiana. Medina said the car stopped a short distance away near Vance and then McComb ran off.

McComb ran into a residential area and into a back yard, where he tried to open a back door but could not get in, Medina said. McComb ran back toward Indiana and turned toward the pursuing officers, holding a handgun and pointing it in their direction, Medina said.

Both officers fired, but Medina said he does not know how many times they shot or the number of times McComb was hit. McComb did not fire his weapon, Medina said.

Neighbors said they heard about five shots and watched as various officers, including a police helicopter, converged on the area. Hours after the incident, Indiana, a main traffic artery through the auto center, remained closed between Adams and Monroe streets.

As investigators walked from home to home interviewing nearby residents, evidence technicians collected bloody clothing and other items from the street, including a handgun found in front of a patrol car.

One of the front windows at Suzuki of Riverside was shot out and the business was closed in the morning. Bob Owens, service manager for the business, was one of several employees waiting behind police lines for investigators to complete their work.

Owens said there was no one in the business at the time of the shooting and damage appeared to be limited to the window and some ceiling material.

Medina said it is unclear whether there were witnesses to the incident and anyone with information is being asked to call Detective Keith Kensinger at (909) 320-8034.

Reach Jose Arballo Jr. at (909) 368-9412 or jarballo@pe.com



Kurt Miller/The Press-Enterprise

Riverside police Officer Greg Matthews documents evidence after a fatal shooting involving two officers. The car driven by the man who was killed can be seen in the background.

Riverside police shoot, kill man near community center

05/28/2003

By ANDREA CAVANAUGH
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

RIVERSIDE - Police fatally shot a man Tuesday afternoon in Casa Blanca after he advanced on two officers with a knife in his hand, authorities said.

The man, whose name was not released, was shot about 1:45 p.m. in the street outside the Ysmael Villegas Community Center at Marguerita Avenue and Esperanza Street. He was pronounced dead at a hospital a short time later.

The man emerged from his parked car with a knife in his hand as officers approached on foot, Riverside police Officer Felix Medina said.

"He made some type of advance toward the officers in a threatening manner," Medina said.

The officers fired their weapons and the suspect was hit at least once, but it was unclear how many shots were fired, Medina said. Police recovered a knife at the scene, he said, but would not elaborate.

Myron Halcon III, 16, who lives at the corner of Peters and Esperanza streets, said he ran out the front door of his home when he heard gunfire.

"When we came outside, he was falling down and they were still shooting him," Myron said.

His father, Myron Halcon Jr., said two of the bullets fired by officers passed through the front bedroom of his home while his brother, four of his children, a nephew and two of their friends were inside.

No one was in the bedroom where the bullets passed through, and no one was injured. Medina said he could not confirm whether the home was struck by gunfire.

Halcon said he was shocked and angry that police would fire their weapons near occupied houses.

"Any one of my kids could have gotten hit," Halcon said. "If they had been in that bedroom, who knows what could have happened?"

The timing of the shooting was even more dangerous, resident Theresa Halcon said, because neighborhood children walk to the Villegas Center for tutoring around the time the shooting occurred.

Residents said the man had been sleeping in his parked car in the area since Friday. The car, a gray 1997 Acura sedan, was reported stolen from Riverside earlier this month, Medina said.

The names of the officers involved in the shooting were not released. Both have been placed on administrative leave, a standard practice following an officer-involved shooting.

The man was shot within four minutes of the time officers approached the car, Medina said. There may not have been time for them to call for less-lethal force such as a beanbag gun, he said.

"I don't know if it was available or if a request was even made for it," Medina said.

Tuesday afternoon, Villegas Park was roped off with yellow police tape as investigators combed the shooting scene for evidence.

Marisol Moreno, who works at the Villegas Center as a recreation aide, said she first saw the man parked in the neighborhood on Friday. He had little interaction with neighborhood residents, she said.

"He wasn't bothering any of the kids," she said. "He didn't even bother anybody for food."

Roy Rivera tutors at the center and spent the afternoon turning youths away before they reached the yellow police tape.

"I'm letting them know that something happened," said Rivera, who was concerned that children might not feel safe at the center if they learned someone had been shot.

The man's death was the second fatal officer-involved shooting by Riverside police this year. Two other men were shot and wounded earlier this year by Riverside officers.

Reach Andrea Cavanaugh at (909) 368-9460 or acavanaugh@pe.com

Staff writer Michael Coronado contributed to this story

Man shot by police identified

RIVERSIDE: Authorities confirm that a bullet did hit a nearby home. The investigation continues.

05/29/2003

By ANDREA CAVANAUGH
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

RIVERSIDE - Residents of a Casa Blanca neighborhood expressed concern Wednesday about a fatal police shooting near a community center that sent a bullet flying into an occupied home.

One bullet fired by an officer struck a home in the 7300 block of Peters Street during the shooting on Tuesday, Riverside police Sgt. Steve Johnson said in a telephone interview. No one inside the home was injured.

Volne Lemont Stokes, 31, of Riverside was pronounced dead at Riverside Community Hospital about 2:20 p.m. Tuesday. He was shot after he advanced on two officers with a knife and a screwdriver in his hands, Johnson said.

The officers were identified Tuesday as Tina Banfill, who has been with the department since November 1996, and Adam Brown, a five-year police veteran. Both have been placed on paid administrative leave while the shooting is under investigation, a standard practice in officer-involved shootings.

Myron Halcon Jr., who lives in the house that was struck by the bullet, said he was weighing the officers' need to protect themselves against the threat to public safety that the shooting created.

"They did what they had to do -- that's understandable," Halcon said. "I'm still angry about the fact that anybody in this house could have gotten hurt."

Halcon said it was a miracle that no one was in the bedroom at the time of the shooting. Eight people were inside the house when the bullet struck, he said. Three adults and 10 children live in the single-story, three-bedroom home.

"There's always someone in that bedroom," Halcon said. "The man upstairs is watching over us."

Woodie Rucker-Hughes, president of the Riverside office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said in a statement that the organization was concerned about Stokes' shooting and the fact that it occurred so close to the Ysmael Villegas Community Center in an area that is frequented by children.

Stokes was sitting in a stolen car parked at Esperanza Street and Marguerita Avenue on Tuesday when two officers walked toward the car about 1:40 p.m., police said. Residents said Stokes had been sleeping in the car for several days.

As the officers approached, Stokes got out of the car, holding a knife and a screwdriver, and walked toward the officers, Johnson said. Both officers opened fire when Stokes ignored their commands to drop the knife, he said.

Stokes was 15 to 20 feet away from the officers when they ordered him to drop the knife and was six to 10 feet away when they fired their weapons, Johnson said.

Stokes' uncle, Melvin Stokes of Los Angeles, said police should have used "less-lethal" weapons to disarm his nephew.

"I believe they had time to use nonlethal weapons," Stokes said in a telephone interview.

"I don't think the gun was necessary."

A variety of less-lethal weapons are used by Riverside police, including stun guns and shotguns that fire a missile resembling a beanbag. Less-lethal weapons are intended to disarm people without resulting in death.

Although less-lethal weapons are available to all patrol officers, Riverside police spokesman Felix Medina said he couldn't comment on what type of less-lethal force was available to the officers involved in the shooting or whether they had time to use them.

Stokes was shot within four minutes of his initial encounter with Brown and Banfill, Medina said in a telephone interview.

"In situations that go by at such a fast pace, there may not be an opportunity to deploy less-lethal force, especially in a situation where someone is armed with a knife," Medina said.

Reach Andrea Cavanaugh at (909) 368-9460 or acavanaugh@pe.com

Officers in danger, witnesses say

SHOOTING: A community review panel report outlines events leading to a Riverside man's death.

07/03/2003

By ANDREA CAVANAUGH
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

RIVERSIDE - Witnesses to the fatal police shooting of a Riverside man say they didn't see a metallic object an officer said was in the victim's hands, but most agreed the use of deadly force was appropriate, according to a report issued Wednesday.

Eyewitness accounts in the report by the Community Police Review Commission state that the officers' actions were appropriate because of the danger they believed Anastacio Munoz posed to police and the public.

The report is a preliminary look at the circumstances surrounding the shooting.

Munoz, 40, was shot in the head on Nov. 17 and died at a hospital one day later. He had amphetamines in his system and his blood-alcohol level was 0.20, the report said. The legal limit for driving is 0.08.

The commission still needs the results of the Police Department's administrative investigation before deciding whether the officers acted within departmental policy, commission chairman Michael Gardner said. The results are expected to be made public within 90 days, he said.

"It's a long, drawn-out process," Gardner said in a telephone interview. "It's frustrating to the commission and, we think, it's frustrating to the family and the public."

Riverside police spokesman Felix Medina referred inquiries to Police Chief Russ Leach, who did not return a call for comment Wednesday.

SUV incident

Police gave the following account of the shooting, according to the review board's report. Officer Melissa Wagner spotted Munoz driving erratically about 1:30 a.m. on Nov. 17 and tried to pull him over. Munoz drove to the home of his in-laws in the 8900 block of Colorado Avenue and stopped his SUV in the yard.

He then drove down the street, made a U-turn, and returned to his in-law's yard. Wagner told investigators she saw a metallic object in his hands and heard him shout that he had a gun. Wagner radioed that information to dispatch, the report said.

Munoz ignored Wagner's commands to turn off his engine and drove the SUV into the street. Then he revved the engine and backed toward the officers, prompting Wagner and Officer Carl Turner to open fire, according to the report.

The report states none of the witnesses interviewed saw a metallic object in Munoz' hand, as Wagner told investigators. Several witnesses heard shouting about a gun, but couldn't identify the source.

Officer John Burnette told investigators Munoz said, "I'm going to shoot you." Munoz' mother-in-law heard him say, "I'm gonna kill one of you guys," according to the report.

Most witnesses agreed Munoz backed the SUV toward the officers, but offered different opinions of how far it traveled and at what speed, the report said.

A witness told police the SUV may have backed up, but he believed it had stopped by the time the officers fired their weapons. Munoz' estranged wife, Lee Munoz, said the SUV never backed up, according to the report.

Earlier citation

Munoz started drinking beer at a Tyler Street bar about 10 a.m. on the day before the shooting, according to the report. The bartender noted his glassy eyes and slurred speech after 7 p.m. and cut him off. He was seen sleeping in his SUV in the bar parking lot between 10:30 and 11 p.m.

One bar customer told another that Munoz said, "You're going to see me in lights," and Munoz' father-in-law told a neighbor that Munoz said he had nothing to live for, the report said.

Munoz was cited in 1998 for ramming another vehicle with his SUV, and a neighbor recalled Munoz ramming his wife's vehicle about 18 months before he was shot. The report stated that the neighbor may have been referring to the incident for which Munoz was cited.

Munoz' sister, Marguerite Romero, said she didn't believe her brother intended to hurt anyone the morning he was shot.

"What they're saying he's done -- trying to run over the officers -- he never would have done that," Romero said. "I think he was scared and he just wanted to go home."

Reach Andrea Cavanaugh at (909) 368-9463 or acavanaugh@pe.com

Wednesday, October 29, 2003

2 named 'top cops' for rescuing girl

NATIONAL AWARD: The Riverside officers saved the 4-year-old who was being held at knifepoint.

BY KATIE E. ISMAEL
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

RIVERSIDE — Two Riverside police officers have been honored nationally as "top cops" for saving a young girl who was being held by a man who had put a knife to her throat.

Officers Scott Borngrebe and William Rodriguez were nominated by another officer who had been at the scene. The award was presented by the National Association of Police Organizations.

Bill Johnson, the executive director of the group, said the awards committee chose the New Year's incident because the officers "saved this little girl from harm."

They put themselves in harm's way to rescue the two young children inside the home, he said.

The New Year's Eve incident was selected among the top 10 from a couple hundred nominations by a committee of law enforcement officials.

Lt. Mark Boyer said that any time an officer gets national recognition, "it's huge."

"The department is ecstatic for them and proud of the work that they do," he said. "it's just a big honor."

Borngrebe said the Oct. 11 ceremony at the Lincoln Theatre in Washington, D.C., was "a once-in-a-lifetime event that you remember the rest of your life."

On Dec. 31, Borngrebe and Rodriguez went to a home on Aries Street on a call about a woman being assaulted by her son. Laurie Wetter had escaped from the home, but her niece's children, ages 3 and 4, remained inside.

Wetter told authorities her son had made previous statements about committing "suicide by cop."

The two officers entered the home through a bedroom window to get the children out. Borngrebe was armed with a 12-gauge shotgun loaded with less-lethal ammunition, police have said.

Borngrebe saw the 4-year-old girl in the hallway and tried to make her walk to him. Michael Wetter appeared and picked up the girl. He was holding two knives, one with a 7-inch blade, and held one to the child's throat, police said.

Borngrebe pointed the shotgun at Wetter and told him to drop the weapons. Borngrebe began backing up as Wetter advanced on him, backing officer Borngrebe into a corner, according to police.

Officer Rodriguez fired once. Wetter was hit in the back of the head and died.

Laurie Wetter filed a claim against the city, the Police Department, Chief Russ Leach and Rodriguez and Borngrebe that alleges the use of deadly force was excessive. The city has rejected the claim.

"It's a tragedy that they had to shoot the suspect," Johnson said.

Lt. Boyer called the situation "intensely stressful," and said they would have liked to take Wetter into custody.

"We don't like to use deadly force..." he said.

Borngrebe has been with the department since July 1995, and was honored with a medal of valor for his work during the Riverside City Hall shooting in 1998. Rodriguez joined the department in 2002 after 12 years with the New York City Police Department.

Police urged to fill gap in shooting policy

01:10 AM PST on Thursday, December 11, 2003

By KATIE E. ISMAEL / The Press-Enterprise

Riverside - Riverside's Community Police Review Commission voted Wednesday night to recommend that police develop a policy on shooting at moving vehicles, and that the Internal Affairs unit conform to existing policy while investigating officer-involved shootings.

The recommendations came out of the commission's investigation of the November 2002 fatal police shooting of Anastacio Munoz, who police said backed toward them in a sport utility vehicle outside his in-laws' house.

The commission voted to recommend the department's firearms policy be modified to include language that deals with shooting at a moving vehicle. The department has a policy governing shooting from a moving vehicle.

The department should also establish or modify training to teach officers to consider their environment before firing, the commission decided.

The panel's Internal Affairs recommendation stemmed from its finding that the unit did not follow written policy in reviewing the Munoz shooting.

While strongly recommending that the department follow existing policy, the commission said that as an alternative, the department could rewrite the rules so they conform to what the panel believes is the unit's current practice. Commissioners found that the unit's approach to investigating officer-involved shootings amounted to an administrative review, not a truly independent investigation.

"I hope we're not saying we accept the fact (that) the practice of the department is contrary to the policy," Commissioner Jim Ward said during a discussion of the recommendation.

In the Munoz case, the panel found, Internal Affairs reviewed the actions of the team that investigated the shooting and others involved with the case, but did not conduct an independent investigation, including interviewing witnesses.

According to the commission's report, police said Munoz ignored an officer's commands to turn off his engine and drove the SUV into the street. He revved the engine and backed toward the officers,

Officers fired 11 shots at him-one hitting Munoz, eight the SUV and one a mailbox. Another hit the frame of a house across the street at the end of the block.

Reach Katie Ismael at (909) 368-9642 or kismael@pe.com

Chase ends in driver's death

CRASH: After ramming a patrol car and trying to hit a motorcycle, the man is shot by police.

01:35 AM PST on Tuesday, December 16, 2003

By TAMMY McCOY / The Press-Enterprise

A driver leaving a hit-and-run crash tried to hit a Riverside motorcycle officer and rammed his van into a patrol car before he was shot by police and crashed into a church, authorities said. The driver later died.

The man was shot at about 4:30 p.m. near the intersection of Philbin and Ivanhoe avenues in the Arlanza area, said Riverside police Officer Felix Medina. The van, a light-colored Mazda MV, then hit an outside wall of a one-story church.



Nearby resident Willie Crawford was trying to take a nap when the shooting occurred.

"I heard three shots, bang, bang, bang, and then a big bang, and I think that's when the car hit the building," he said.

The man was taken to an area hospital where he was pronounced dead. Medina said he did not know how many times the man was shot. His name and identifying information were not available.

David Bauman / The Press-Enterprise
Riverside motorcycle Officer Bobby Sayers explains to a supervisor Monday afternoon how he was almost run down by the driver of a van

Medina said police were called to a non-injury hit-and-run crash on Tyler Street and Magnolia Avenue. A motorcycle officer tried to stop a man driving a Mazda van.

"The suspect attempted to ram into the motor officer several times," Medina said.

The chase continued onto Rutland Avenue where an officer driving a patrol car joined the pursuit. Medina said the van rammed into a patrol unit several times. The van chase continued onto Philbin Avenue and the driver attempted to make a U-turn near the intersection of Ivanhoe Avenue.

At least two other patrol units joined the chase and at least one fired at the van, Medina said.

The van crashed into the front corner wall of the church. The van's hood was crumpled, its front end touching the corner wall in front of Iglesia da Dios Pentecostal church.

Medina said one officer involved in the incident complained of pain and was taken to an area hospital. Medina had no details about the officer's injury.

The building was empty when the crash occurred, said minister Rony Guebara. The minister said he came to check on the church and find out what happened. He waited at the edge of an empty gravel lot that spans some 30 feet on the east side of the church to Challen Avenue.

Long strips of yellow police tape prevented bystanders in the neighborhood from entering Philbin Avenue at Rutland and Challen avenues.

Four police cars in front of the church's driveway were parked at varying angles, as if they had swarmed the area from every direction. The patrol units' red, white and blue lights flashed more rapidly than the blinking icicle lights hanging from the eaves of neat one-story home across the street. The patrol cars' lights reflected off a white, lattice fence around another well-manicured yard facing the shooting scene.

Riverside police detectives are investigating the shooting.

Reach Tammy McCoy at (909) 368-9466 or by e-mail at tmccoy@pe.com

Staff photographer David Bauman contributed to this report.